

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-26

NEW YORK TIMES
5 MAY 1982

Letters

A 'Lie Detector' Given to Telling Lies

To the Editor:

I am moved by the plight of John C. F. Tillson, who may lose his job at the Pentagon because some sensitive information was leaked to the press (news story April 26). Mr. Tillson says he was not the source of the leak, and several senior people who are in a position to know the truth agree with him.

Why then is he in trouble? Largely because of a polygraph test, and that's what this letter is about.

The polygraph is often erroneously called a lie detector. The reason it shouldn't be called that is that no one knows for sure what its reliability is in detecting lies, and there is no way to find out, especially in a particular case.

The physiological variables that the polygraph records, such as pulse rate,

respiratory frequency, skin conductivity, are altered by many stresses other than guilt over telling lies: fear, anger, embarrassment or even guilt about some event totally unrelated to what is in the questioner's mind.

That's where the false positive tests come from. False negative tests occur when pathological liars breeze through a string of lies without turning a hair.

Because it is so unreliable and because a false positive test can blast a career or a life, I believe the use of the polygraph for this purpose should be made illegal. As a first step, I suggest that The Times stop calling it a lie detector, because to do so gives the polygraph undeserved legitimacy.

ROBERT E. NYE JR., M.D.
Norwich, Vt., April 27, 1982